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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007498

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV ECON KDEM JO

SUBJECT: DEPUTY PM MUASHER BRIEFINGS HINT AT AMBITIOUS

REFORM AGENDA

REF: A. AMMAN 6898

B. AMMAN 6612

C. AMMAN 5230

D. AMMAN 4125

E. AMMAN 2427

F. AMMAN 2378

G. AMMAN 2043

Classified By: CDA Daniel Rubinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The current draft of the National Agenda advocates a concrete and highly ambitious agenda for political reform and for social and economic development. It includes electoral reforms (still under discussion) that would make the system more representative of the population, and would likely benefit Jordan's leading Islamist party, though it is not clear yet how much. For the reforms to be enacted by legislation, Jordan's political establishment would have to be persuaded to reform away some of its power. News that the Agenda's champion, Deputy PM Muasher, is engaging the Islamic Action Front on electoral reform suggests he is seeking a tactical alliance against the anti-reform elements in the East-Banker dominated Parliament, likely a necessary and well-measured step to outflank reform opponents. End summary.

12. (C) Charge and DCM met September 12 with Deputy PM Marwan Muasher, who is leading the 26-member royal commission charged with drafting a national agenda for comprehensive reform. Muasher confirmed that the draft is almost ready for presentation to the King, and will endorse &principles8 that will need to be enacted as legislation. The most controversial recommendations, those on new elections and parties laws, are still under discussion.

Engaging Islamic Action Front on Electoral Reform

13. (C) On the new elections law, Muasher confirmed earlier reports (ref a) that the agenda will recommend that each voter be able to give a second ballot to a national party list. Muasher referred to discussions with leaders of the Islamic Action Front (which controls 17-20 votes in the 110-member Chamber of Deputies) over how many seats in a restructured parliament would be selected from the national parties list, and how many would remain for representatives of geographic constituencies, as under the current system. Muasher speculated that discussions with the IAF would result in about twenty percent of the seats going to national-list candidates. (Post has also heard from Muasher's staff that the National Agenda might propose cutting the number of members of parliament from the current 110 to just 80.) At the same time, Muasher indicated that his staff has gamed out how many seats the IAF might win under various electoral system scenarios, as part of his effort to calibrate how much he can afford to give the IAF in exchange for their support.

14. (C) COMMENT: The IAF - whose leadership includes both East and West Bankers - will press for as many national list seats as possible. It has the only strong national party organization in Jordan, and would certainly benefit from this reform. Palestinian-Jordanians would also gain more parliamentary representation than they now have. Currently, only 17 of the 110 members of the Chamber of Deputies are of Palestinian origin. END COMMENT)

15. (C) Muasher conceded to CDA that the GoJ had not yet settled upon a public roll-out strategy for the National Agenda. COMMENT: The engagement with the IAF, however, leads us to conclude that Muasher understands that the Agenda will stand or fall on the government's ability to secure support from broad sections the public and the political class. It is likely key decisions will be made after the King returns from the U.S. September 23. In a briefing with donor government representatives, Muasher admitted &powerful people8 will oppose the Agenda's political reform proposals, but &ordinary people8 will be pleased.

16. (C) From a less upbeat perspective, Ali al-Ayed, a key advisor and Director of Information at the Prime Ministry, told poloff September 17 that he was concerned Muasher had not paid enough attention on how to &market8 the Agenda once released to the public. Ayed acknowledged that drumming

up support for the Agenda among traditionalist East Bankers could be very difficult, and that someone besides Muasher) who is disliked by some, in part, for his advocacy of Palestinian rights) would need to serve as the Agenda,s &face8 before this constituency.

Wider Briefings Provide Some Details on a Broad Agenda

17. (SBU) Muasher also provided briefings on the Agenda to donor government representatives (including USAID Mission Director) and to the media September 15. In these presentations, Muasher described a one-thousand page document, with a one-hundred page summary, all in Arabic, with a shorter English press kit. The project will be presented to the King in late September, and released in October.

Political Life

18. (C) Muasher said he believed the Agenda,s recommendations could be enacted as laws, rather than as constitutional amendments. (NOTE: By our reading of the Jordanian constitution, this is true of the Agenda initiatives we have heard of, except for the rumored reduction of the number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and for a proposal to refer disputed elections to the judiciary, rather than to parliament as is currently the case.) The principal reform law would be a kind of &Bill of Rights8 that would set out political principles from which would flow further legislation on elections, political parties, media, women's empowerment, NGOs, civil service reform, and other issues.

Development

19. (C) The Agenda would also set out priorities for investment, which Muasher did not, however, specify in these briefings. The document would record current baselines in a number of development sectors, call for the formal launch of development plans in 2007, and set target measurements for 2012 and 2017 for indicators such as unemployment, national debt, deficits, etc. Muasher mentioned in his briefing to donors that the plan assumes seven percent real GDP growth per annum over the ten-year life of the plan. (COMMENT: Although Jordan exceeded this target in 2004 and probably will in 2005, assuming such growth over ten years strikes Post as quite optimistic.) Muasher said ministries would be charged with detailed responsibilities for measuring and reporting their performance; he admitted that only a few currently have this capacity, and noted that the GOJ will look to donors for technical assistance in this regard.

10. (SBU) Beyond political reform, Muasher briefed donors on the Agenda,s inclusion of tax reform, highlighting plans to broaden the tax base, reduce the number of special sectoral tax regimes, and flatten general rates to achieve a 15-20 percent unified rate.

Comment

11. (C) Until Muasher's briefings this week, some observers in Amman thought it likely the National Agenda Commission would present recommendations that left the fundamentals of politics here untouched. Now it is becoming clear that the Agenda will aim to gore the oxen of some important East Bank traditionalist politicians. If the draft that reaches King Abdullah,s desk in late September still includes the proposal for the election of anything near twenty percent of MPs from national lists, the King will have to make a hard choice: either confront anti-reform forces that are among the monarchy's oldest supporters, or water-down a reform agenda whose outlines are now widely known. If the King opts for a showdown, he will need to engage in some heavy and skillful politicking with a parliamentary establishment that only stands to lose from reform, or, as local political observers are beginning to speculate, exercise his constitutional option to suspend parliament and push forward the reform agenda by royal decree.

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